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Good literature can come in digital forms – just look to the world of video games

James O'Sullivan

6-7 minutes

Some years ago, tired of scrolling through Netflix in search of something we hadn't seen yet, I suggested to my partner that we play a video game instead. Not the gaming type, she wasn't too keen on the idea, but I promised something where she didn't have to "aimlessly collect things". The game we played was Dear Esther, which is part of the burgeoning trend in "literary video games".

The suggestion proved successful. She enjoyed the experience and, compelled by immersion and the story, progressed right through the two-hour play-time in one sitting. I knew that Dear Esther would be the perfect game for someone who doesn't like games. All the hallmarks of gamification are absent: you don't have clear objectives, you don't have to overcome obstacles, collect anything, battle anyone, and you can't really die. In Dear Esther, all you really do is walk.

Developed by British game studio The Chinese Room, Dear Esther belongs to a contemporary genre of games known as ["walking simulators"](#). These titles involve little more than

travelling from one point to another, sometimes interacting with the occasional object while leisurely taking in the surrounds.

Many walking simulators have gone on to receive critical acclaim, works like [Everybody's Gone to the Rapture](#), also by The Chinese Room, [The Vanishing of Ethan Carter](#), [All the Delicate Duplicates](#), and [Journey](#). The degree to which one has stuff “to do” varies between such works, but typically, players have very little to interact with in these worlds. And yet, they are immensely popular.

Finding the story

The reason is that these games are all about story and about the vital role of place in the act of storytelling. Creators of digital fiction are using rich virtual worlds to make their stories engaging. We all know when we have come upon a good story, because we want to stay in it, we want to know how it ends. We want to go over it again to be sure that we haven't missed something the first time around because there is pleasure in knowing and unknowing. A feeling that there might be more story to be revealed, hidden somewhere in the game world. But this is a false sense of liberation – what I refer to in my book [Towards a Digital Poetics: Electronic Literature & Literary Games](#) as the “illusion of choice”.

Scholars of digital fiction have long been fascinated by [this idea](#), the reality that interaction makes the player feel like an active participant in the narrative's progression; when they are in truth still a voyeur, bound by predetermined authorial structures as they might be in print. The difference, of course, is that sense of active participation, of narrative exploration

which, however false, is extremely compelling.

What is interesting about the use of video games to tell stories is that we are constantly being told that literature is suffering in this current age of screens. Such arguments tend to construct a tension [between print and screen-based storytelling](#). But language is just one form of expression, and while it is a hugely powerful instrument when yielded on its own, there is also much that can be achieved by combining it with other modes, as we have long seen with film and other multimedia storytelling.



All the Delicate Duplicates. Mez Breeze and Andy Campbell,
Author provided (No reuse)

Video games, inherently mixed media, are ideal for such expressive mash-ups. A storyteller can describe a world with words, but they could also show you that world with computer graphics; allow you to build it in your mind's eye, or traverse it with a mouse and keyboard.

It is easy to argue that compared to mixed media storytelling, the use of language alone can be more liberating to readers:

the worlds we imagine are limited only by ourselves. Whereas video games, despite illusions otherwise, are mathematically confined. The worlds we inhabit in games are, while seemingly vast, surrounded by hard-coded event horizons – points which the player just cannot pass. But good stories are not defined by their capacity to be infinite, but the extent to which they make us feel something, whatever their aesthetic confines.

Digital literature's day

Of course, not all video games are concerned with story. In fact, Ian Bogost, one of the stars of game studies, thinks [they're better without](#). Some are still all about play, about doing, about space without narrative. Astrid Ensslin, who wrote *the* book on this topic, [Literary Gaming](#), talks about a “literary-ludic spectrum”, with games that privilege play being on one end and games that privilege story on the other. Considering that video games are [the cultural form of the day](#), there is plenty of room for both.

Video games have become a new form of literature without much fanfare. People still refer to the 1970s and 80s as the glory days of interactive fiction, a time when computers were giving choose-your-own-adventure stories a new lease of life. But technology has come a long way since then, and so too has our ability to capture the hallmarks of good literature in digital forms.

Literary games are not just those indie works like *Dear Esther* and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* that privilege spatial narratives. Even blockbuster, big-budget (what are called “Triple A”) titles like *Red Dead Redemption* and *Horizon: Zero*

Dawn recognise the importance of characters, dialogue, setting and theme. These are all the elements of literature, and somewhat quietly, they have become central to a large element of the contemporary video game canon.